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"Diverse but not too diverse": Social Identity, Oppression, and Resistance in Fan Culture

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Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

Through bringing together literature on social identity, community, and oppression, the current study examines the formation of social identity within fan culture through member's struggles with the tension between resisting the oppression they face and the desire to belong. Fan culture communities, once associated with eccentric outcasts, have transitioned into mainstream popular culture. This transition is accompanied by a demographic shift within the community with increased participation of members of subordinate social groups (e.g., women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQIA community). The current research project draws on Social Identity Theory as well as Chavis and McMillan's four elements of Community Theory to understand the experiences of a diverse sample of participants within fan culture communities, with a specific focus on the perpetuation of (and resistance to) structural forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism) within these communities. Data included semi-structured participant interviews (*N*=20: 15 Female, 5 Male, 15 White, 3 Latina/o, two other), observational ethnographic field notes, and archival material. Utilizing inductive and deductive thematic analysis, three major themes were constructed from the data: resistance, oppression, and sense of community. Results examine a complex community environment in which social identity is shaped by experiences of privilege or oppression and members' connection to the community through the power of resistance.

"Diverse but not too diverse": Social Identity, Oppression, and Resistance in Fan Culture

Television, film, comic books, and other forms of media serve as powerful resources for identity development both individually and as part of a community. Groups with which we self-identify shape our perception of the world, including our notions of race, class, and gender as arranged within a hierarchy of social power (Hurtado, 1997). One example of a community identity group is fan culture. Once considered a group of people who deviated from societal norms, previously labeled negatively as "geeks" or "nerds," fan culture has spread into the mainstream with the popularity of movies, books, and TV shows, including *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Captain America*. Despite its increased popularity, there is a lack of diversity within mainstream media and in terms of the most visible products within fan culture (Madrid, 2009). Indeed, media representation within fan culture is often limited to white cis-gendered[1] men. When popular characters deviate from the traditional canonical[2] concepts, they are often met with hostility and backlash from fans; when a new version does not uphold the same norms and standards as the original (Madrid, 2009). From a social-community psychology perspective, the rise of fan culture communities' demands attention to the broader social context in which these groups develop. Specifically, how might members of fan communities conceptualize their social identities and sense of belonging in an oppressive context?

The current study endeavors to better understand fan culture communities, with a particular focus on the creation of a psychological sense of community. In this study, the term "fan" is a descriptor for individuals who personally identify as a fan of, or take part in, "geek" or "nerd" oriented activities. Within broader society, "geeks" or "nerds" are stereotyped as single-

[1] Cis-gendered can be defined as a person whose self-identity conforms to the gender of their biological sex
[2] Canonical can be defined as the original writing of a character is the material accepted as the official story of that character in a given universe. (Duffett, 2013)

minded social outcasts obsessed with a specialized subject or activity, who talk about their niche interests with excessive enthusiasm, and who lack social skills or etiquette (Maggs, 2015). Within this community, however, there is not a consensus on the definition of geek or nerd, as the connotations of the terms generate disagreements among members. This study will, therefore, use the term "fan" as an identity descriptor, defined as "individuals who maintain a passionate connection to popular media, assert their identity through their engagement with and mastery over its contents, and experience social affiliation around shared tastes and preferences" (Jenkins, 2012, p. 12). Additionally, within this study, the term fan culture or fan community are used interchangeably to describe the overarching practices and population of people who identify with "geek" or "nerd" associated activities. The term fandom, therefore, describes a specific niche interest group of a community member. For example, participants attended sci-fi/fantasy conventions that hosted comic creators, artwork, and actors, from specific fandoms, such as *Star Wars* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Fan culture can be conceptualized not only in terms of its relationship to media but also as a context for community building and empowerment. Yet, because fan communities are socially constructed, they are susceptible to the norms, values, and dominant discourses circulating within the broader cultural context. Thus, racism, sexism, and other oppressive structures inevitably manifest within these communities. A burgeoning line of research examines discrimination and gatekeeping practices within fan communities (e.g., Reagle, 2015), but little has been written within the social and community psychology literature (see O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015, for an exception). The current research aims to describe the experiences of participants in fan communities, with a specific interest in how members experience, perpetuate, and resist oppressive structures.

The manifestation of oppression within fan culture

This study examines oppression using a social-community psychological lens. The term oppression describes policies, social practices, traditions, norms, and language which function to systematically exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2012). The group that benefits from the exploitation of another group is known as the dominant group. Conversely, the group that is exploited is known as the subordinate group. Oppression is created through social structures that generate systems of power and privilege. It is important to note that oppression is different from discrimination or prejudice. Discrimination and prejudice describe dynamics that occur on the individual level of analysis, whereas oppression occurs when "one group's prejudice is backed by historical, social, and institutional power" (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012, p.39). Because oppression involves institutional control, it exists both intentionally and unintentionally. In other words, oppression can be perpetrated even when no individual person within a given institution is personally oppressive toward others. Although this study interviewed participants on their individual experiences with oppression, the unit of analysis is not restricted to the individual. Rather, individual experiences are used as illustrative of broader systems of oppression and privilege.

Oppression manifests at three primary levels of analysis: interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. To recognize the manifestation of oppression within the fan community, it is important to have an understanding of social stratification. Social stratification is the process of assigning an unequal value to different groups within society (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012). All major social group categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, religion, and ability) are constructed as dominant or subordinate identities wherein each identity is defined by its opposite (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012). One group is, therefore, positioned as more valuable than the other.

The group that is positioned as more valuable, also known as the dominant group, has more power and access to resources, including within fan culture. Historically, white males have held positions of authority as creators and decision makers within the fan community (Madrid, 2009). Therefore, the ideology of white males has been imposed across social identity groups within fan culture, thus enabling prejudice and discrimination to have been built into the culture and normalized. Recently, fans have begun to bring attention to blatant issues surrounding historical discrimination. For example, by calling for female characters to be portrayed with more realistic combat outfits, rather than the often sexualized looks women are represented in (Duffett 2013). Dominant groups, however, often react adversely to the diversification of canonical characters. Although all three types of oppression first identified are related, this study explicitly examines each level of analysis to contextualize the manifestation of oppression within fan culture communities.

Institutional oppression occurs at the level of social institutions, organizations, and systems (e.g., government, media, education, religion, criminal justice system). In this case, the policies, laws, norms, rules, and values governing institutions systematically benefit one group over others, creating and perpetuating systems of dis/advantage based on social identity group membership (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012). For example, within fan, culture communities, media (e.g., television, film, comic books, and games) serves as an institution that creates and perpetuates dominant cultural narratives. One of the most powerful fan media companies, Marvel, has never had a woman or a person of color in an executive position (Rhoades, 2008). Historically, Marvel's editors and CEOs have been white, cis-gendered males (Madrid, 2009). Guidelines surrounding who and what was allowed to be printed in comic books, known as the Comic Code Authority, reflected the dominant group narrative. The appearance of subordinate

group members, especially women, LGBTQIA and people of color, in comic books were thoroughly regulated and controlled (under the fear that reading about subordinate identities may corrupt children) through rules written into the publishing of fan culture materials (Madrid, 2009). The lack of representation in Marvel's staff and the publishing laws created by the Comic Code continues the perpetuation of the dominant group's values and ideology. The oppressive ideology can be further observed when characters are designed to represent "others" such as women, people of color, or LGBTQIA people, in heavily stereotyped ways (Pustz, 1999). Through the lack of representation in corporate companies and comic laws, institutional oppression (e.g., white men controlling media) can lead to cultural oppression (e.g., stereotyped representations of different groups).

Cultural oppression results when the values, beliefs, and ideals embedded in social representations endorse one group as superior to another (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2012). One instance of cultural oppression is within American school systems. In the United States, middle class European cultural norms, traditions, and arts are privileged. It is not uncommon for public schools in the United States to designate English as the only official language to be spoken. All other languages are discouraged, despite the fact that America does not have a national language. Another instance of cultural oppression within the United States is in regards to beauty standards. When industries select models to display what is normalized as beautiful or desirable, the selected models primarily reflect phenotypes associated with white Europeans. Within fan culture, cultural oppression is prevalently observed through the selection of what social identity group receives positive media representation. For example, the majority of superheroes and heroines are white, straight, and able-bodied, which is reflective of the beauty standards and dominant groups within broader society (Madrid, 2009).

At the *interpersonal* level of analysis, oppression manifests as personal and interpersonal attitudes and actions indicative of prejudice and discrimination (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2012). For example, interpersonal oppression occurs when a comment made by a member of a dominant group is directed at a member of a subordinate group highlighting the difference in power dynamics. One example of interpersonal oppression in fan culture is the assumption that women are a part of the fan community due to a man's influence and therefore have less knowledge (and power) within the community. Another example of interpersonal oppression within the fan community would be if a male member stated "you played that video game pretty well for a girl" or "we went easy on you because you are a girl." The assumption that a person's gender influences their performance within community-related activities highlights an example of a micro-aggression and serves to marginalize subordinate members further.

Social identity and sense of community in fan culture

One theory that helps further assess the impact of power differentials within fan culture and the development of social identities is Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT describes how a person's sense of who they are (the way they communicate, behave, and interact) is based upon their group memberships (Tajfel, 1986). The centrality of a role a social identity group is given influences the salience of a person's perceived membership to the group (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Identities, therefore, are used as a way to recognize the desirability of a group and also as a function of group structure regarding size and distinctiveness from out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By placing values on one's social identity, people who identify more strongly with their social groups are more likely to display behaviors that contribute to intergroup conflict and prejudice. Therefore, SIT helps to elucidate inclusive and exclusive behaviors of members of the fan community. The SIT also highlights how individuals connect themselves to larger social

structures as well as how people rely on groups to provide self-knowledge, meaning, and purpose.

In order to increase self-image, people enhance the status of the group to which they identify by dividing the world into a "them" and an "us." SIT argues that members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group to enhance their self-image, leading to an increase in prejudice and discriminatory views of the group seen as the "other" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT is an important concept to apply to fan culture, as the community has developed a social hierarchy in which certain aspects or interactions within the culture separate desirable "us" group from the "them" group, for example, the concept of "real" fans versus "fake/ casual" fans (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By assigning a distinction between those who are actual fans and those who are acting as a fan for social gain, community members are implicitly assigning a social value to other members. The assignment of a "fake" label to another fan enables the "real" fan to distance her/himself from community members seen as part of an undesirable social group (Duffett, 2013; Tajfel 1982). A person's social identity is developed based on their connection to the community to which they belong.

Social and community psychology literature suggests that a strong sense of community is associated with psychological empowerment, positive identity development, and greater access to psychological and material resources (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rappaport, 1981). The term *community* can be understood as two separate, but overlapping concepts. One is the geographical idea of community: the town, city, or neighborhood in which one resides. The second is the interpersonal relationships within the community, or the "quality of relationships without reference to locations" (Chavis & McMillan, 1986, p. 8-9). In modern society, the second notion is heavily influenced by technology, allowing the community to develop interests and skills,

regardless of one's location (Durkheim, 1964). This study will utilize Chavis and McMillan's (1986) four elements of a psychological sense of community as a theoretical framework to synthesize the experiences and perception of fan culture members.

The first element is *membership*: the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of connectedness. Membership is a critical element to this study, as all of the participants self-identified as a member of the fan community. One social context for members to meet, interact, build connections, and form a sense of membership are fan conventions. Fan conventions offer a common space for fans to experience themselves and find others with whom they connect. The second element of a psychological sense of community is *influence*: the feeling of making a difference within the group. As this study analyzed the boundaries of participation within fan culture, the element of influence helped to conceptualize members' experiences with inclusive and exclusionary factors such as institutionalized forms of oppression. Influence also highlights members' perceptions of power, social stratification, and social identity in relation to others. The third element is *reinforcement*: the feeling that one's needs will be met by the resources received through their membership to the group. Reinforcement helped to identify the discrepancies within fan culture membership in regards to who can afford to be actively involved in the community and who cannot. The final element is *shared emotional connections*: the belief that group members share history, similar experiences, and time together. Shared emotional connections were particularly prevalent within fan culture. There is a history of discrimination against people who identified as a part of the fan community that often led to alienation and social exclusion (Duffett, 2013). The social exclusion community members experienced binds members together and create a unique context within community membership.

Conceptualizing resistance and agency within fan culture

The current study utilizes social identity theory, the theory of psychological sense of community, and resistance theories to understand members' struggles with oppressive structures and how members' create meaning through these interactions. Two intersecting aspects categorize resistance; for resistance to take place, an individual must have a critique of social oppression and must be motivated by an interest in social justice (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). For this study, resistance can be conceptualized by three types of oppositional behavior: self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformative resistance. Self-defeating resistance occurs when a person has developed a critique of oppressive social conditions but is not motivated or is unable to create social change. For example, if a fan critiqued the way minority groups are represented within the fan community, but did not have the motivation or ability to create social justice change surrounding representation issues, then that fan would be demonstrating self-defeating resistance.

Conformist resistance refers to the oppositional behavior of a person who is motivated to create social justice change but has no critique of systems of oppression. Individuals who participate in conformist resistance are individuals who offer "band-aids" to treat the symptoms of a problem rather than the structural causes of the issue (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In other words, these people strive to create social justice change through pre-existing social norms and systems. An example within fan culture would be the community member who thinks that the best way to change how women are represented would be to have characters drawn in more conservative clothing. Therefore, the more concealing outfits could be adopted by other community members who costume or create artwork. This community member fails to challenge institutional practices, or question the relevancy of socio-historical factors. Within this

study, it is important to note that people who perform conformist resistance are capable of creating some social change. Yet, without a critical analysis of economic, social, and cultural structures that support oppression, the community member is limited in the impact and possibility for social justice (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

The third and final form of resistance are transformational resistance. Transformational Resistance calls for an awareness and critique of oppressive structures, and the person must be somewhat motivated by social justice (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Where self-defeating resistance extends the oppression of the individual in question, "transformational resistance offers the greatest possibility for social change" (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 319). One form of transformational resistance that can be exemplified in fan culture is the idea of "proving them wrong." For a community member to "prove them wrong" they need to have confronted negative ideas surrounding their social identity group, be motivated by these negative images and opinions, and be driven to change fan culture systems for themselves and others (Yosso, 2000, p. 109).

The current study examines the intersection between social identity, community development, and resistance within the context of oppressive systems in fan culture. The broad area of inquiry guiding the research was how fan culture community members' experience oppression – particularly experiences of members of subordinate social groups and how members then create a sense of community and belonging within an oppressive context. Through qualitative methods, participants were interviewed, and their stories were analyzed using deductive and inductive techniques. Participant narratives were supported through data triangulation of archival and observational field notes.

Method

Participants

The current study sought to generate knowledge about fan culture from fans themselves. Therefore, all participants self-identified as members of the fan community. Participants were eligible to be interviewed if they were eighteen or older, considered themselves a member of the fan community, and have attended at least one convention. A purposive, snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Flyers with study information were handed out by researchers and left on public tables and areas at fan conventions (e.g., Comic Con, Anime Con). Researchers approached participants at conventions and collected their contact information if they were interested in the study. Online blogs that focus on the fan community were also contacted to gain participants. The research's purpose was advertised to participants as a study to learn about the different experiences people face within fan culture. Participants were asked to be interviewed about their personal experiences within the fan community and what the fan community means to them (Appendix A). The interviewing researcher also described her own involvement within the community. Participants then took part in individual semi-structured interviews to acquire stories and experience within fan culture. Based on participant answers the semi- structured interview changed to include questions about the demographics of convention attendees, Con friends, and specific experiences with oppression (Appendix C). Previously interviewed participants were then followed up with, with the additional questions. After every interview, participants were asked to suggest others who may be willing to participate in an interview.

There was a total of 20 participants interviewed within the study. Fifteen of these participants self-identified as female, four as male, and one as a transgender male. Fifteen of the

participants self-identified as white, one as Chinese, and one as Latina. There were three participants who self- identified as mixed race, two of which as white and Hispanic, and one as black and Hispanic. It is important to note that all males interviewed for the study were white. The youngest participant was twenty years old, and the oldest participant was thirty-seven years old (M= 24.89, SD = 5.17).

All participants had the option to create or choose their pseudonym. Many participants took the opportunity to pick a name after one of their favorite characters or after someone who inspires them (i.e., Leslie Knope). Others asked the researcher to choose a pseudonym on their behalf that they then approved (Appendix B).

Researcher Positionality

The primary researcher is a twenty-one-year-old white woman who identified as a member of the fan community. The research mentor is a thirty-two-year-old white woman, who also identified as a member of the fan community. Researchers were, therefore, knowledgeable about the social norms, boundaries, and social discourse (language) used by the fan community.

Data Collection

Fan conventions served as a context for gathering observational data. Researchers submitted and received IRB approval to interview and observe fans at community conventions. Fan conventions attended included regional venues (e.g., Rhode Island Comic Con, Anime Boston, and Boston Comic Con in Massachusetts) and national conventions (e.g., New York Comic Con, Flame Con). Data triangulation, a "technique that facilitates validation of data through the application and combination of several different research methods in a study of the same phenomenon" (Kulkarni, 2013, p. 3), was achieved through the collection of ethnographic field notes, participant interviews, and archival materials.

Qualitative data was obtained from in-person or virtual interviews developed for the study. The interviews were conducted by either undergraduate researcher Julia Stern or mentor Dr. Danielle Kohfeldt. The semi-structured interview was designed to obtain a comprehensive picture of participants' experiences of oppression within the fan community and the experiences of the community members within this context (see Appendix C). Participants were informed, both orally and via a written consent document, that their answers would be utilized as data for a research study. The interview lasted between 30-60 minutes, was audio recorded, and took place at a time and place the researcher and participant mutually agreed upon. Interviews were transcribed after recording.

Because many participants may be unable to meet for face-to-face interviews, participants had the option to complete their interview electronically. Web interviews were conducted via email, phone, Skype, or another mutually agreed upon form of communication. In the case of an emailed interview, participants received a list of interview questions and typed their responses. They received follow-up questions if any of their responses needed clarification. Participants' interviews were kept confidential. All proper names were changed to pseudonyms in any writing or presentations about the research.

Observational field notes were collected at conventions. Researchers acted as participant-observers, actively participating in fan culture through attendance at fan conventions. We collected ethnographic fieldnotes following guidelines outlined in Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). Field note collection included shorthand jottings of observations while in the field, and detailed written notes transcribed based on these jottings within 48 hours of the observations. Observations were conducted in three primary contexts at each convention: during moderated

panels, on the convention floor, and within transitional spaces (e.g., waiting for areas outside event rooms, entrances, and exits).

Finally, the archival material was collected. Archival material included convention flyers and websites, programming schedules and descriptions, signage, photographs of convention spaces, online blogs and comments, and cosplayer cards.

Data Analysis Strategy

This project used a combination of deductive and inductive qualitative approaches to data analysis. Deductive coding was conducted using a codebook constructed from the existing theoretical and empirical literature. In addition, because empirical research on this topic is limited, we also performed inductive (open) line-by-line analysis to construct new codes and themes to extend concepts present in the literature. An iterative process was utilized wherein data collection, and data analysis were conducted in an interactive cyclical process. The deductive coding of data led to new ideas and codes, as data was analyzed the conclusion drawn added another way in which data could be examined (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data analysis is, therefore, a continuous process where line by line coding was narrowed based on development within the study and literature was returned to in a cyclical process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Inductive codes included the expansion on the concept of gatekeeping, representation, the use of resistance, distancing, and types of influence community members hold. Narrative analysis, using recommendations from Miles and Huberman (1994), helped identify themes in fan community member's narratives. The first step of this process was to reduce and organize the transcribed data (Ahrens, 2006). The lead investigator, Julia Stern, identified transcript segments that pertained to experiences with formal and informal conditions for inclusion or exclusion and noted key concepts. Researchers then grouped and organized concepts into larger categories by

sorting observations into conceptually similar and dissimilar groups. A consensus method was used to generate a name and definition for each concept being described. The resulting concepts were then used to supplement the initial codebook (Ahrens, 2006). A consensus model was used throughout the process whereby disagreements between researchers on the proper placement of the concepts was discussed until agreement was reached. This codebook was used to code the interview transcripts (Ahrens, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Results focus on interviews with subordinate group members within fan culture as they describe their social identities in relation to power and resistance, though many of the findings were reinforced through the recorded field notes and analysis of archival material. Three overarching themes were constructed from the data: 1) oppression, 2) resistance, and 3) sense of belonging. The analysis examined how oppression influences the creation of a sense of community within fan culture's participants. What emerged from the analysis was how participants forged social identity-based networks (e.g., connecting with others from similar racial, gender identity groups) as one tactic to enhance sense of membership and belonging. Community members utilized resistance as another way to practice agency and ownership within oppressive spaces.

Oppression

All participants interviewed described experiences of observing or facing oppression within fan communities. It is important to note that all 20 participants referenced or experienced instances of oppression within the fan community. Participants within the study discussed sexism and racism as the most evident forms of oppression. However, participants made references to

other frequently overlooked forms of oppression such as heterosexism and ableism. Instances of oppression were coded as either institutional, cultural, or interpersonal.

Institutional Oppression. When institutions fail to recognize people of subordinate identities through the laws of a state, the segregation of education, or in the case of fan culture the movie and comic book industry, it enables the perpetuation of oppressive ideology and actions. For example, in the 1950s DC Comics stated "the inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance" (Madrid, 2009, p 77). DC Comics Inc., as an industry created a rule perpetuating institutional oppression by dictating that women should receive differential treatment within stories, and specifically that women should be treated as "secondary." Based on DC Comic's rule women are assigned a position within fan culture that is systematically perpetuated as lesser than men. Similarly, DC Comics Inc. also followed a set of publishing guidelines from 1954 to 2011, known as the Comic Code Authority. The Comic Code Authority was created to uphold morality and objected to "indecent" content such as scantily clad women (Nyberg, 1998). The publishing laws enforced by the Comic Code Authority served to label women and other subordinate group members, as less valuable and as immoral within the fan community.

Although the Comic Code Authority was created in 1954, the policies and norms that helped to perpetuate oppression were followed by many industries until 2011. Recently, researchers noted policies, like those in the Comic Code Authority, that serve to position one group as more powerful than another within a fan convention. Researcher, Julia Stern, observed institutional oppression occurring during the 2015 Rhode Island Comic Convention; "There was a sign for geek speed dating [in the front entrance] that had a piece of paper taped to it that stated 'ladies are free'" (Appendix D, Image 1). By labeling "ladies" as "free," the convention industry

is creating ideology and practices that designate women as atypical within the fan community and sexualizes them as an accolade. Researcher, Julia Stern, also observed at the 2016 Boston Comic Con Convention that "a unisex bathroom had been designated for non-gender conforming fans. However, the bathroom was located in the furthermost corner of the convention center, with no clear markers, or label on the convention map to guide attendees" (Appendix D, Image 2). Although, a planner of the convention recognized that having a unisex bathroom available would be an inclusive measure, the location and the lack of markers on the convention floor and within the convention map demonstrated oppressive norms and policies. By making a unisex bathroom available but not providing the tools in which to utilize the bathroom, the convention recognized that there was a gender identity issue but only took minimal actions to remedy the problem and did not change any of their formal policies or documents to reflect the LGBTQIA community's needs.

Although there is a demand for policy changes throughout the fan community the fan industries are slow to meet the request from community members. Participant Leslie Knope explained why she thought her ex-boyfriend's friend and fan culture as a whole struggle with issues surrounding oppression. She analyzed how institutional issues, such as racism, "trickles down" from the broader society into "geek culture."

> I think the way that nerd culture is affected by racism is like it was a subconscious, subtle racism that… I guess that our society sometimes is built up in a way that keeps certain groups down. A perfectly blatant example is with the prison time you get if you are caught with crack versus cocaine. It's the same exact drug, but if you are caught with crack, the punishment is much harsher. Guess which demographically is more likely to be caught with crack? African American. It's bullshit, and so blatantly racist. [...] I think it just builds and then it like blows up and then there are stupid comments about what race Spiderman should be you know? Oh, and basically only white people are represented in our media. I think that has something to do with it. There's no diversity. I don't know, I mean it raises about a million other nuanced issues, like subtle things like that; things that don't seem important but they are. (Female, 28, white-Hispanic)

Here, Leslie describes the way fan culture specifically is affected by racism and white supremacy (i.e., in subtle ways, that suggest it is normalized). She seems to be proposing that the racism built into the criminal justice system (institutionalized) also manifests, in fan culture norms around who is entitled to representation. She also points to a lack of diversity in media as a central issue underlying these instances of racism. Leslie's analysis points out a key issue; institutional oppression and cultural oppression are interrelated. Institutional oppression is the foundation from which both cultural and interpersonal oppression stem. Interestingly unlike Leslie, many interviewees did not bring up issues surrounding institutional oppression but instead focused on instances of cultural oppression. Leslie herself, while discussing institutional oppression is not identifying it as an issue within fan culture, but instead, recognizes that institutional oppression of the broader society relates to cultural oppression occurring within fan culture.

Cultural Oppression. Through observational field notes and participant interviews, the most common form of cultural oppression observed within the fan community involved the norms in which different socially constructed identities are represented and the limitation of the power these social identities hold. Leslie, a woman from a liberal area of the west coast of the USA, exemplifies the importance of cultural oppression on representation as she describes a recent visit to a conservative town in the Southwest. Leslie explains an experience she had with her ex-boyfriend's old friends from high school that made her evaluate issues surrounding racism and privilege in the USA.

> Last time we were there, one of his old high school friends was, rippin' on, Finn in the new Star Wars, and how he felt that his role was just a shoe-in for a- I'll say 'black guy,' but he said a much worse word, just to be PC or whatever. He also felt that Rey was disappointing because they made her a 'N-word lover…' It was just so jarring… (Female, 28, white-Hispanic)

Leslie's encounter with a male fan from a more conservative area highlights the importance of the cultural context in forming and influencing the concepts around fan culture and oppression. White men have historically dominated Fan culture media industries (e.g., Marvel, DC Comics, etc.). The narratives that are being told are therefore those that promote the ideology and power of white males. Members who are socialized into a culture where inequality is normalized struggle with reconciling the way things have always been with the advancement of social justice. Within fan culture dominant group members' social power is constantly being reinforced through cultural oppression and creating a divide between the in-group (who is considered a part of the fan community) and the out-group (the people who seemingly don't belong, often subordinate members). Therefore, the outrage Leslie observed surrounding Finn and Rey in the new Star Wars movie was common throughout the fan community. People on online forums, such as Reddit, bashed the two new characters for being similar to the original popular characters but poorly redone replications who deviate from the standard canonical concepts. Members also accused content creators of "pandering" to subordinate group members by featuring a female character or person of color as a protagonist. Often, the negative conversations surrounding Finn and Rey revolved solely around their identities as a person of color and a woman. It is through the normalization of institutional oppression that cultural oppression can manifest through the representation and language used surrounding minoritized identity groups.

Representation, therefore, acts as an important model for the norms, standards, and expectations of fan community members and heavily influences the development of social identities. At the 2015 Rhode Island Comic Convention, researchers noted the types of products that feature certain social identities displayed for sale, as well as, how the characters were represented (Appendix D, Image 3):

> While walking down artist alley, I noticed that many of the featured pictures had white male characters as the prominent figure within them. When women were displayed, they were either as a companion or in very sexualized poses and were mostly white. (Julia Stern, Rhode Island Comic Con, 2015)

Similar observations were made at the 2016 Boston Comic Convention. When women are represented as a sidekick or in a subservient role, it reinforces oppressive norms that serve to define women within the fan community as unusual (especially without a male presence). Then when women are being represented as hyper-sexualized characters (i.e., disproportionate body parts, sexual poses, etc.) their place within the community is being further defined as inferior to males.

Women being secondary to men has a pervasive history within the fan community. For example, the Bechdel Test created by comic artist Allison Bechdel in 1985, provides three basic rules to examine how women are represented within the movie industry. To pass the test, a film must feature two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. The point of the Bechdel Test is to highlight how women's complex lives are underrepresented or nonexistent within media. Famous fan culture movies such as, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II, Avatar,* and *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* all fail to pass the Bechdel Test. Although social justice progress has been made since 1985, the objectification of women that still occurs in fan art serves to perpetuate a complex set of oppressive cultural norms that fan women create a sense of belonging and social identity within. Although there is a significant misrepresentation of women within fan culture, it is also important to note that there is a lack of representation amongst other subordinate identities.

Gem, a participant who professionally studies institutionalized issues and is a creator of fan culture herself, reflected on how artists create and interpret characters within subordinate groups. When asked about demographics within the fan community she describes the way in

which subordinate groups fail to be portrayed, or worse, misrepresented by people in positions of social influence:

> Women and people of color and people of different sexualities are not represented in geek media like comic books, video games, and science fiction fantasy films. For example, out of 100, the top 4 science fiction/fantasy films as of 2014, only 14% of them had women as protagonists, 8% of them had protagonists of color, and there were no women of color or LGBTQ protagonists at all. [...] When we are represented sometimes, especially in science fiction, we're aliens, or we're androids. [...] We're not in there or when we are we're misrepresented, and we're not getting the chance to become creators because of institutionalized racism and sexism and homophobia [...] that's in effect just like it affects society it affects these other medias as well. (Female, 28, half-black half-Hispanic)

Participant Gem highlights two different levels to representation within fan culture, character portrayal and social identities which hold power. The representation of characters within fan culture seems to be essential in creating the narrative and norms for people of different social identities. Having women consistently displayed as hyper-sexualized, or people of color as aliens, normalizes concepts of inferiority, objectification, and subordinate group members as "others." The normalization of such representations is detrimental to the empowerment of subordinate group members, as well as to essential elements of the community such as membership, influence, and reinforcement. The way artists then choose to represent characters reflects how other creators in positions of more social power (and therefore, higher influence within the community) display or are asked to display their characters. As Gem highlighted, creators within the fan community are generally members of the dominant group and the use of their decisions about how to depict subordinate group members are often based in oppressive ideology and stereotypes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Their decisions then radiate into the rest of the fan community by developing the language and norms that are a part of cultural oppression. For example, by depicting people of color as androids or aliens, creators are establishing a narrative that "others" subordinate group members. The concept of othering refers to how different social

identity groups differentiate themselves in ways that are based on inaccurate perceptions and implicit claims to "superiority" (Duffett, 2013, p. 37).

Participant Leslie elaborates on Gem's statements as she describes the consistency of the lack of representation or misrepresentations within fan culture. She describes who is being represented as she explains the demographics she sees within TV shows, comics, and movies:

> Oh my God. It's so white. So many white people. My boyfriend [and I] make it a point all the time to count how many white people are in every new cast [...] we do the same thing with body types [...] I'm always like 'Well. Another skinny, white person, that's who they're casting [...] Supernatural is driving me crazy, I'm like 'This many demons would not be this beautiful.' Let's be real right now. This is ridiculous, is all of hell filled with Heidi Klum? Come on. This is not realistic AT ALL to real life, [...] I think that there needs to be a LOT more integration of different types of people, all over the board, but… it's a slow, slow moving train. (Female, 28, white-Hispanic)

When members of the fan community are not represented, it perpetuates a power dynamic where one social group is valued over others within the community. The creation of desirable identities versus unwelcome identities within fan culture can lead to social identity conflict, wherein subordinate groups especially face difficulty in reconciling their different identities (chosen and unchosen) within the fan community. For example, if a woman conforms to the beauty standards and customs of those depicted, she is called a "slut." If she chooses to change the costume, she then faces the risk of being ridiculed for breaking the canon (Reagle, 2015). The double standard created for women within the fan community stems from the historical and pervasive prejudices of the dominant group. Due to cultural oppression, members are often faced with a choice to conform to the views of how fan culture represents similar identity groups or resist the oppression taking place. It is important to note that despite cultural oppression occurring (specifically through the representation of identity groups) community members can empower themselves and develop a sense of belonging through utilizing resistance.

Interpersonal Oppression. Interpersonal oppression was detected through comic convention observations, archival data, and participant interviews. The most repeated examples of interpersonal oppression were microaggressions or actions directed at subordinate group members from those of the dominant group. Researchers noted at conventions interactions between community members that were oppressive in nature but reacted to as normal.

> While walking in line, a white brunette woman driving a car slowed to ask people in line a question about directions. A male in line then said, "Only if you have coffee with me." The woman who was driving the car said "asshole" with a smile and drove away. Some other people in line laughed. (Rhode Island Comic Con, 2015, Julia Stern)

When the male stated he would only help the woman if she went on a date with him, he was implicitly assigning a value to the woman's role within the community. The concept that women join the fan community because of a male or only as a way to seek attention is normalized through cultural oppression and then perpetuated between community members. Participant Maggie (female, white, 21) expanded on being a woman in fan culture as she discussed how she is often discouraged from going to conventions on her own without a male because she has seen other women in groups and alone be questioned and harassed. Participants observed harassment (the act of systematic and continued unwanted and annoying actions) as being disproportionately acted out by members of the dominant group to members of the subordinate group (Riger, 1991). Participant Sebastian (transgender male, white, 23) noted that he has never seen a woman harass a man, but that he has observed men harassing women. Interactions between community members exemplify how the dominant ideology surrounding women within fan culture (objectification, inferiority) has disseminated throughout the institutions that create fan culture (media) and allow members to rationalize oppressive behaviors.

The depowering of subordinate members' identities by members of the dominant groups was also observed at the Cosplay for a Cause Panel. The panel focused on using cosplay as a

means of community service and had five featured panelists. One of the most well-known of these panelists who travels to different conventions as Batman often spoke for or interrupted the women he works with, who was dressed as Wonder Woman.

> The popular Batman cosplayer in the region was speaking about an event he had done with the white, petite, woman dressed as Wonder Woman next to him. Instead of using her name he referred to her as "princess here." (Rhode Island Comic Con, 2015, Julia Stern)

By using the term princess, the Batman cosplayer was diminishing the importance of the woman he worked with, as well as the character, and was disempowering the female cosplayer. The term princess could be considered an example of a microaggression as it was used to diminish and "other" the woman. During the panel, the male cosplayers continued to highlight the assigned value of women in fan culture as they discussed cosplaying at events. Panelists described how as women in cosplay it is important to stay realistic to the portrayal of characters which means picking characters who have appropriate clothing.

> The man dressed as Star-Lord said they had a woman dressed as black canary with fishnet tights. She was stopped and asked at an event to put pants on. Luckily she had spandex shorts in her car to put on. When choosing a costume, you have to be careful of the exposure of it. (Rhode Island Comic Con, 2015, Julia Stern)

When discussing the appropriateness of a costume, the conversation revolved around the policing of women's bodies. One cosplayer who dressed as Deadpool had been to events in his skin tight costume and it had not been seen as inappropriate, demonstrating that costumes that are skin tight are inappropriate for women but not for men. By asking the female cosplayer to put pants on, the organization was implicitly objectifying the woman and body shaming her. Fan culture often presents women's bodies as sexualized objects, thus making them indecent and "inappropriate" when a woman decides to dress as a character. In the panel, women's bodies were described as problematic, whereas men's bodies were not a point of concern. It is worth

noting that the panelists often wear their costumes at events for children, and when costumes on women were critiqued it surrounded concepts about what was too inappropriate or "sexy" for children to see. Participant Maggie (female, white,21) explained that women within fan culture face a double bind as "there's really no place for girls in the geek culture that doesn't sexualize them in one way or another." Panelist went on to discuss wardrobe "malfunctions," an issue that may occur as a professional cosplayer. However, the malfunctions described tended to revolve around female body parts being exposed rather than the authenticity of the character.

In summary, as in any community, social identities in fan culture are not equal. Social stratification is ubiquitous within fan culture through the salience of particular identity groups over others. Reflective of the larger society, the dominant narrative, and thus the narrative perceived as more valuable, is that of white cis-gendered men (Reagle, 2015). White men, therefore, have more access to resources within fan culture. Since fan culture itself is created from multiple different industries, all of which are male-dominated (e.g., media), white males direct the discourse of the culture and control the power. Oppression exists within fan culture communities, and the manifestation of oppression is a backdrop in which participants of the study are attempting to create a sense of community. When the social identities that hold higher power are understood, participants resisted social stratification and challenged its manifestation. During this study, it was observed that members of fan culture who had identified with marginalized social identity groups and experienced discrimination found safe spaces in which they were able to build a stronger identity to the community.

Fan community

The different aspects of participants' social identities are deeply interwoven to form the narrative of their experiences with oppression, resistance, and community. After establishing that

oppression is occurring within the fan community, the study focused on how community members reconcile experiences with oppression and their desire to belong in an unequal system. Members of subordinate group identities seemed to experience tension between their chosen identity (i.e., fan community member) and their non-chosen social identity (i.e., race, gender). To maintain a sense of community, members utilized resistance to oppression as a means to create a sense of belonging.

Community boundaries. Community boundaries are an essential part of all communities. Within fan culture, the policing of the fan identity surrounds the ideas of what it means to be a true fan. As a subcultural group, the fan community often defines themselves by stated differences from others. The attempt to create distinct community boundaries occurs by defining what is mainstream as "other." By labeling people in the mainstream as other, it serves as a symbolic marker of which members can define themselves as "authentic" (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 9). As previously discussed, fan culture is often hierarchical in terms of identities. The ranking of identities can be unfavorable toward subordinate members, many of whom face a double bind of simultaneously being "too geeky and not geeky enough" (Reagle, 2015, p. 2870). For example, women who put "too much effort" into their looks are ostracized for not being a "true geek." On the other hand, women who do not meet the beauty standards set by men within the fan community are ignored. If women are unable to find a "happy medium" between the two, they are treated as either a non-entity or too attractive to be a true community member.

Within fan culture, one of the ways the boundaries are set and maintained is through gatekeeping (e.g., impromptu "quizzing" of others about their knowledge, making fun of people who act inconsistently with their "fan" claims, and restricting access to conventions to those who

can pay the registration fees). When asked if she had ever felt discouraged from attending a convention, participant Rose (female, white, 21) explained how she is intimidated to participate in conventions due to the fear of being questioned by a gatekeeper. Rose went on to explain how gatekeeping is a way for other community members to question whether or not people are a true fan intentionally. Participant Maggie added onto Rose's definition by stating:

> Gatekeeping is making yourself all of a sudden supreme ruler of this fandom and deciding who gets to be in the fandom with you- who is the actual geek who is the actual fan. (Female, White, 21)

Maggie continued to explain that she believes gatekeeping happens as a way to display who has more social influence and power within the fan community. By subjectively deciding who has the right to call themselves a fan, members are creating a power dynamic that systematically labels one group as less than another. Such an action supports the creations of in-groups and out-groups within the fan community.

One way in which gatekeeping and the boundaries of membership within fan culture manifests is through issues surrounding "fake/wannabe" fans. Although community boundaries themselves are not problematic, the "fake" fan stereotype is disproportionately acted out by members of the dominant group toward members of subordinate groups (e.g., men to women) (Reagle, 2015). Interestingly, when asked if she believed if there were fake or wannabe fans, participant Rachel responded:

> I guess so yes the thing is, I think a better word than fake or wannabe is casual because you can like something a little bit, without loving it […] sometimes when it comes to fandoms people don't have that in between. You can casually like a show and not watch it forever [...] and you might want to talk about it with other people, but there's this stigma, that if you don't know a lot about it, then you're fake and people know that, and they accidently perpetuate themselves into that. [...] I like the term casual a lot more because there's also a lot of hatred towards fakes (female, 20, white)

Overwhelmingly, when female participants were asked about "fake" fans, they would hesitate, start to say no, then correct themselves, and explain how "fake" wasn't the right term, while something along the lines of casual was more appropriate. However, the term casual fan is another way of policing membership. Participants used the term casual fan as a way to distance themselves from the stigma and stereotype that surrounds "fake" fans. Rachel's description of a casual fan demonstrates the importance of social power in terms of access to resources, as only those with certain privileges afforded to groups with higher positions of power have the ability and resources to be a real fan. Based on Rachel's definition, to be part of the community, members must have resources (access to time, ability to go to conventions), and therefore, people labeled as fake fans are more likely to be those in a position of lower social equality. It is important to note that the concept of resources is not limited to materials, but rather includes the resources and tools to shape the dominant narrative about one's own social group. Rachel's statement, therefore, places hierarchical value on fan memberships. Similarly, another participant Ren (male, 37, white), described how his group used the term "aspirational" fan, as the term "fake" was highly frowned upon within his group, as they believed inclusivity is important. However, just like Rachel's "casual" fan descriptor, "aspirational" is terminology used to assign a value to the fan identity of another person, under the disguise of an inclusive practice. By labeling others as less committed or as identity exaggerators, participants were elevating their own identities while simultaneously disempowering others' (Duffett, 2013; Tajfel, 1982).

Being a "fake" fan is used as a way to discredit a subordinate group's member social identity within fan culture, and separate subordinate members from the community. Gatekeeping surrounding "fake" fans, therefore, serves as a way to uphold and perpetuate oppression. In

contrast to Rachel's view on "fake" fans, participant Bishop, when asked if she believed in "fake" fans stated:

> Yeah, I- (sighs)… I don't- I'm pausing so long because I hate that term, because it's the kind of term that does get applied to me [...] the fake geek girl phenomenon is one that outrages me so much that I don't like the term, on the other hand, I've had GUYS, stop me on the street, I was wearing a Spiderman t-shirt, and I was sitting on the T and this very awkward guy was like "HEY do you like comic books?" and I said yes because it is true [...] and he used that as an excuse to just talk to me for the whole time that I was on the T with very little input from me, and so that he could just lecture me about comic books [...] and THAT to me is a fake geek. If YOU need to go around LECTURING people about things you DON'T even know about to prove that you are geekier than they are, then that does nothing for me, [...] so yes. I guess in that sense I do believe there's such a thing as a fake geek but I like to judge people on their knowledge base as opposed to their demographic where possible. (Female, 25, white)

Bishop demonstrates a personal social awareness surrounding the stereotype of "fake" fans, by highlighting the gatekeeping practices around "fake" fans as an oppressive structure for subordinate groups. Bishop's analysis on what being a "fake" fan entails, recognizes an important community boundary within fan culture, the consumption of knowledge as social power. Within the fan community, the gatekeeping of members surrounds the concept of knowledge. Both Bishop and Rachel describe being a "fake" fan in terms of pretending to know more than a person actually does. Bishop described fan knowledge as being utilized as a means to create an unwanted conversation under the assumption that the other person does not have the same knowledge level (or social belonging), whereas Rachel described the issue of "fake" fan as a qualifier for a person's "level" of membership. Bishop also subverts the concept of a fake geek by labeling the gatekeeper as the "fake," because real geeks do not go around gatekeeping like that. By challenging the conventional ideology surrounding the "fake" fan and reversing it and implying the gatekeeper is the "fake" fan, Bishop is resisting the interpersonal oppression occurring.

Community boundaries are further defined within fan culture by participant Raven. Raven self-identified an experience she felt was gatekeeping during a sci-fi convention that she attended with her significant other.

> My boyfriend came to Arisa, the day he was coming I was going to be dressed as Barbara Gordon's Batgirl. I bought him a Wayne Enterprises t-shirt because I thought it would be fun if he wore the Wayne Enterprises t-shirt when I was dressed up as Batgirl, but, people kept giving him shit, and I first wasn't really processing what they were saying. People were just like "oh way to make her do all the work" to him or like "why did you make her wear the hard costume"[...] Specifically there was a woman [...] who was going on and on about how nice it is that I was willing to make compromises to come do this thing that my boyfriend was interested in [...] That was what made it click in my head that all those people that had been shouting harassing things at him weren't saying harassing things at him because they were giving him shit for not being dressed up, which is what I THOUGHT they meant, It was that they were giving him shit for making his girlfriend dress up, and that was the complete opposite of what was going on. (Female, 25, white)

Like Bishop, Raven is describing an instance where her identity as a member of fan culture was being questioned or ignored. The gatekeeping in Raven's story is subtle and highlights an instance where interpersonal oppression is occurring based on the perceived dominant narrative that women do not have an interest in fan culture. Participant Maggie expands on the assumption that Raven was an unwilling participant at the convention. Maggie discusses how women who are unable to answer a gatekeeping question correctly are described as a "fake" fan due to, the assumption that women are only interested in the fan community because it is a way to get a male's attention. The people who harassed Raven's boyfriend, and made judgments about their relationship, were defining the boundaries of membership regarding who is seen as a true fan based on their social identity. The dominant narrative being perpetuated within Raven's story illustrates the concept that being a woman within fan culture is considered odd or out of place, and helps to create the fake geek stereotype.

Resistance. When people think of resistance to oppression it is common to think of protests, riots, or boycotts. Within fan culture, community members resist oppression in much

more subtle ways. Many community members express feeling uncomfortable while interacting with other community members for fear that they would be questioned or denied as a member of fan culture. The fear of being denied membership to a group that is an intricate part of participants' social identity spurred a desire to resist the oppression they face and to instead create a sense of belonging. When a subordinate group member (e.g., woman, person of color, LGBTQIA) forge a sense of belonging within a context of oppression, it is in itself a form of resistance. In this way, resistance can be seen through the creation of safe spaces, member influence, and defiance of social norms. Participant Gem describes the difference between attending a well-renowned comic convention and a convention specifically created for the purpose of recognizing and honoring marginalized social identities as well as being run by members of a subordinate group:

> Flamecon, which was, New York's first LGBTQ convention put on by geeks out and that was the happiest convention that I've ever been to. It was just like super positive everyone was excited to be there everybody was really nice. My cheeks hurt from smiling all the time and I think it was because, the guard you might have up at regular conventions are down there because you were like okay if you're here you are either you know a part of the community or an ally, so I don't really have to worry, it was really positive and supportive (female, 28, half-black, half-Hispanic)

The LGBTQIA community within fan culture has an extensive history of marginalization and social stratification. For example, in 1954, the Comic Code Authority created strict guidelines for the portrayal of characters to be written and drawn in a moral and appropriate way. From this movement, Batwoman was formed to be the romantic interest of Batman who was perceived as seeming too gay (Madrid, 2009). The Comic Code Authority is one example of the oppressive ideology that an LGBTQIA person faces as a member of the fan community. Participant Gem's description of Flame Con demonstrates an instance where a marginalized group has created a safe space in resistance to the oppression faced by the larger community. LGBTQIA specific

spaces serve as counter space that acts as an area of support and an environment in which communities of resistance can form. Flame Con and other specific conventions created by and for members of subordinate group identities, therefore exemplify transformative resistance. Flame Con serves as a "site of the distinction between the marginalization oppressive structures impose and the way in which members recognize that social inequality" and then choose to create a space of resistance—as an area for the expression of counter-narratives (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 336). As Gem defined it, the fear at a "normal" convention can be identified as the oppressive norms that members are expected to participate in. Gem's assessment that Flame Con was "supportive" and "positive" highlights an important impact the creation of safe spaces has; resistance is being utilized to maintain a sense of belonging.

The concept of resistance being a form of community building is exemplified by participant Leslie Knope as she discusses her interactions with self-identified fan community women who participate in a group called Geek Girl Brunch:

> It's a supposed to be safe place for identifying, girls to have brunch and geek out together, so we have like themed brunches, it's kind of at the discretion of the officers, we have them like every couple of months, so like the LA chapter does it every month which is kind of depends and it's just meant for- It's just honestly a safe place for people to geek out together (female, 28, white-Hispanic)

Leslie Knope is also describing resistance seen through the creation of safe spaces. Geek Girl Brunch is a safe space for women to be a part of fan culture and be a part of an accepting space that serves to generate a sense of belonging over shared interests. The creation of safe spaces boosts the influence members feel they have within their community, enhancing their sense of belonging and sense of community. However, unlike Flame Con, Geek Girl Brunch highlights an example of conformist resistance. Flame Con exists and operates outside of the dominant community norms were as, Geek Girl Brunch is meant as a space to create social justice change

yet, functions within the dominant culture. Geek Girl Brunch, therefore, is attempting to make social justice change through pre-existing social norms and systems. Both the resistances seen through Flame Con and Geek Girl Brunch promote aspects of a community like shared connections and membership. Resistance to oppression by marginalized groups is, therefore, seemingly critical to maintaining a positive social identity and connection to community groups.

Another example of resistance to fan cultural norms occurred at the Queer enough panel during Boston Comic Con 2016. LGBTQIA creators within the industry discussed the lack of representation and the heteronormativity within fan culture. Creators explained how when they work for a large industry like Marvel, they draw or write the stories their supervisors tell them to display and do not have the ability to create diverse characters as freely as they wish. Instead, they create independent works that represent the struggles and real life issues of those in subordinate communities. At the panel, they told community members that fans hold the greatest ability to influence the community by actively discussing and creating their works. One such artist at Rhode Island Comic Con 2015 reimagined popular characters to make them more realistic and representative of all community members.

> One male artist changed the ethnicity of the main characters to feature people of color. Wonder Woman and Two-Face were two such characters. Each character also had a full photo to themselves. This meant that there were no supporting figures within the images. (Rhode Island Comic Con 2015, Julia Stern)

By recreating popular pictures and giving each character its main focus, Huddleston was resisting the dominant expectations and stories by creating his own. Again, two types of resistance can be observed from these examples. The critique of the social inequalities taking place within fan culture by the panelist, but the lack of ability or motivation to create social justice change demonstrates self-defeating resistance. The panelists understand oppressive structures exist within their community but are not seeking ways to rectify the issues, and in fact,

further contribute to the oppressive narratives by writing and creating comics within the dominant system. Interestingly enough, like the male artist who displayed counter-narratives within his artwork, the panelist spoke briefly about their own third party comics that represented more accurately subordinate group members. When artists create their own artwork to counteract the narrative the dominant group perpetuates, they are demonstrating conformist resistance. Although the artists are creating social change through their own representative artworks and comic books are transformative, they are doing so within the pre-existing system and therefore, not impacting mainstream institutions within fan culture.

Although artists in the Queer enough panel did not feel as though they carried enough power to stand against the corporations and create individual community change, actors within Star Trek found a way to strategically make a change by leveraging the privilege of an ally.

> At the Star Trek panel the panelists (two white women – Marina Sirtis and Gates McFadden – and one African American man – Michael Dorn) discussed the racist and sexist scripts they sometimes faced. They described how they would try to change their lines, and in many cases had a method to do so. The two women actors on stage discussed how the directors or scriptwriters were typically not open to changes. The actors explained that they would double team the director/writer: one [subordinate] cast member would ask for a change to be made and be rejected, then Patrick Stewart (an older white male who played the main protagonist, Captain Picard, in the series) would suggest the same change and this would persuade [the writers/ directors] to change it. (Rhode Island Comic Con 2015, Julia Stern)

The Star Trek cast exhibits transformative resistance as they recognized the social inequalities taking place and were able to take actions that changed the narrative being presented to the fan community. Subordinate group members were able to create lines and show that more accurately represented their identities by creating a system of resistance that utilized the social power of Patrick Stewart. Hollywood is a very competitive place, and it can be costly to stand up against forms of discrimination and oppression. Members of the Star Trek cast resisted the oppressive societal standards at the time by utilizing a fellow cast's member's access to resources and

power. The subordinate actors were, therefore, able to resist and change how their characters were viewed and portrayed within the show.

Throughout the study, it was observed that fan community members, especially of subordinate identities, were able to develop a sense of belonging when oppression was occurring through the use of resistance. It is interesting to note that members who engaged in self-defeating resistance were often more disillusioned with the fan community and had a less prevalent sense of community membership. However, fans who engaged in a conformist and transformative resistance noted the progress the fan community was making in becoming more "inclusive" of all its members and often had a more positive sense of belonging to the fan community. Resistance within the fan community was therefore always described alongside a community member's sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging. As discerned above, to maintain a sense of community where oppression is occurring, member's utilized resistance and developed a critical analysis of their social settings to come together and develop a space to which they belonged (and were represented). Participant Scully discussed attending a panel at a convention and learning new ways in which she could connect and identify with the community:

> Then one year I went to a panel, on, queer comics. And I got to hear from Allison Bechdel who wrote Fun Home and Are You, My Mother? And if you've heard of The Bechdel Test in media. Yeah. She wrote the comic where that's cited from.[...] I got to learn about all of these underground comics or comics that are focused on, people from subordinate groups as like the main characters or about their lives. (Female, 32, white)

Underground comics are not only an example of a form of resistance they are highly instrumental in creating a sense of belonging for those in marginalized groups. Through underground comics and the counter-narratives that they create, fan members can empower one another and their social identities. When asked about their experiences with characters in fan

culture, participants repeatedly stated how white, and non-representative the characters are in their actions and appearance. When offered the opportunity to read comics about characters who are from subordinate groups, participants would take advantage of the possibilities to see similar people (and therefore themselves) being represented as powerful. Participants Kamala (Female, Latina, 27) expanded on the idea of marginalized identities being represented as empowering. Kamala discussed her love for the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Despite Buffy being white, her representation as a "badass" woman inspired Kamala and made her feel a deeper connection to the fan community. Many participants like Kamala, were unaware of third party comics as Scully described but instead cited comics such as the new Miss Marvel or Miles Morales Spiderman as examples of the way subordinate group members were beginning to see themselves more within the group. When fan members desired a larger social identity representation within the community, they developed a sense of belonging through the creation of their own comics, artwork, or blogs which specialized in recognition of marginalized identity groups.

Participants who engaged as part of the online fan community often did so as a way to influence the community and create narratives that caused discussions or challenged the "canon." Participation in the online community took form through the creation of fandom specific blogs, fan fiction, online games and engaging in conversations on sites such as Reddit. When asked about her experiences with online fandoms and the impact the internet has had on her experience within fan culture participant Leia Solo stated;

> It allows me to be able to meet other fans in ways that I would never have been able to before, because my best friend lives out in California, we haven't officially met in person, but we are going to be meeting in November because she's coming to con [...] it connected me to her it connected me to some of my other amazing friends (female, 20, white)

Notably, Leia was one of the few participants who discussed online experiences as a way to connect her to others. In her case, being able to meet others with shared interests expanded her connection to the fan culture and helped to form a deeper sense of belonging. The online fan community further contributed to increasing the sense of belonging to members by bringing together people who once only got to interact at conventions. The relationships built surrounding conventions between communities members are known as "Con Friends." Participants described how convention friends used to be the people they would see only at conventions. However, with the online fan community, and technology convention friends can now "turn into real friends." Both Participant Leia and Sebastian highlighted how the online aspect of the fan community allows for the expansion of social support networks. Like Leia, Sebastian described how his convention relationships had extended past conventions only, and he is now going to attend one of his "con friends" weddings. Leia went on to discuss within her interview many of the key aspects involved in having a strong sense of community such as influence and reinforcement as she described her relationship with actresses such as Kristin Bower. Similarly, participant Kiri discussed the blog that she runs about Star Wars, and how it serves as a way to talk and discuss ideas surrounding fan culture. Although not all the feedback Kiri received online is positive, she discussed how it helps to connect her to new people and expand her viewpoint on issues, themes, and ideas within her fandoms. Of note, 20% of participants within the study were contacted through online methods due to blogs or sites they ran that were related specifically to subordinate group members within the fan community.

The sense of belonging participants develop within the fan community seems to be dependent upon their access to resources like the internet and the way members analyze and resist social inequalities. Through resistance, community members create narratives to which

they are represented and feel like they belong. Counter narratives support the development of the five elements of the psychological theory of community and help to diminish the creation of In-groups and out-groups within fan culture.

Implications and Conclusion

What emerged from the analysis was how the formation of community when oppression is occurring was created through acts of resistance that deepened a sense of belonging to the fan community. When oppression is occurring within the fan community, members are separated into in-groups and out-groups based on their social identities. In-groups and out-groups were defined by oppressive norms and social expectations that were then perpetuated within community boundaries. Community boundaries separated members into desirable and undesirable identities that mirrored the social stratification within broader society. Members who were considered "real" or desirable had access to both resources and social influence. Oppression, therefore, framed the narrative into which fans defined their identity and sense of belonging.

To fully understand the resistance taking place within fan culture, it is necessary to view actions of resistance within the context of their oppression. Resistance within fan culture often takes the form of small, everyday actions, that help empowers community members. The different types of resistance observed overlapped, demonstrating that resistance is fluid and multifaceted. Community members who engaged in conformist and transformative resistance seemed to have a more positive connection overall to the fan community, whereas participants who engaged in self-defeating resistance appeared to be more disillusioned in their membership to the fan community. In this way, actions of resistance were intricately tied to participants' sense of belonging and fan identity.

Members of the fan community often self-select to join the fan subculture group as a means to escape issues within mainstream culture. Fans who seek out a culture outside of the mainstream often possess a different conceptualization of the world and enter the community already critical of institutional issues. On the other hand, fan culture and popular culture have an increasing overlap. Fan culture has become less of a counter culture and more of a branch of the mainstream. The experiences described by participants in this study are not representative of the fan community as a whole. The current study's participants, in addition to being members of the fan community, hold subordinate identities. The results of the study suggest that fan community members positionality (of identifying with one or more oppressed group) influence the analysis and types of resistance experienced. Therefore, members of the fan community experiences and actions could be influenced by an already developed critique of oppressive structures. Through joining the fan community, participants are already resisting issues that are occurring within mainstream culture. Actions of resistance within the fan community help to build a sense of belonging and shared connection as community members are actively participating in resistance through membership identity.

The shared connections fan culture members had to one another were supported by member's access to the online community, as well as conventions. Sense of belonging within the fan community was able to be developed through a wide variety of mediums. Each medium, however, had community members who interacted through resistance and connected to each other through resist measures. Future research should, therefore, focus on interrogating theories of resistance and sense of belonging to create a comprehensive understanding of community development.

Future research should also expand on specific gender and class differences within the fan community as the most common disparity participants observed gender or class-based. One way, future studies could pay particular attention to class based issues is through research with fan members who are unable to attend conventions.Future research should pay specific attention to racial, LGBTQIA, and ableism issues surrounding representation or lack thereof for community members. Future research should also examine if participants' recognition and critique of higher level forms of oppression may be based on age and level of education. Due to the researcher's positionality and the purposive, snowball method of sampling, this study did not receive enough participants of diverse backgrounds.

Through participant interviews, observational field notes, and archival data, researchers discerned that three levels of oppression are taking place within the fan community. Members are, therefore, creating a social identity in an environment that perpetuates oppressive norms and expectations. To develop a sense of belonging when oppression is occurring, members utilized resistance to promote what they deemed as a more inclusive community. The analysis conducted on fan communities can be applied to the broader society and used to better understand member connections and development of a sense of belonging within a community experiencing oppression.

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Appendix A

Recruitment email sent to participants:

Hello, my name is Julia Stern, and I am an Undergraduate Researcher at Bridgewater State University. I am currently running a study to learn about the different experience people face within [geek/nerd/fan] culture. If possible, I am interested in interviewing you about your experiences within this community and what it means to you. Interviews can be conducted in person or online at your discretion. All interviews are anonymous.

As a member of the fan community, it is my hope that this study will help to create positive change for people of all different identities. If you would be willing to participate, please reply to this email about the method that would work best for you.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Julia Stern

Recruitment flyer

Appendix B

Table of chosen pseudonyms by participants:

Pseudonym	**Demographics Gender/Race/ Ethnicity/Age**
WillowMoon	Female/ Chinese/ 21
Gem	Female/ half-black, half-Hispanic/ 28
Rose	Female/ Caucasian/ 21
Maggie	Female/ White/ 21
Kiri	Female/ White/ 28
Bishop	Female/ White/ 25
Raven	Female/ White/ 25
Melificent	Female/ White Hispanic/ 34
Kamala	Female/ Hispanic Latina/ 27
Ghost	Male/ White/ 22
Leslie Knope	Female/ White- Hispanic/ 28
Ren	Male/ Caucasian/ 37
Rachel	Female/ Caucasian/ 20
Sebastian	Transgender Male/ Caucasian/ 23
Leia Solo	Female/ Caucasian/ 20
P K S J	Male/ Caucasian/ 20
Scully	Female/ White/ 32
Link	Female/ White/ 20
Tollhouse	Male/White/21

Appendix C

Semi-Structure Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. How many years of school have you completed?
3. How would you describe your race and ethnicity?
4. How would you describe your gender identity and sexuality?
5. Was this your first time attending a convention?
    a. If not, how many times have you attended a convention?
    b. What conventions have you attended?
6. How did you first get involved in attending conventions?
7. What made you want to attend this convention?
8. How would you describe your overall experience at this convention?
    a. Can you share any specific positive experiences you have had?
    b. Can you share any specific negative experiences you have had?
9. Have you ever felt discouraged from attending a convention like this one?
    a. If so, can you explain why?
10. In what ways are other convention attendees similar to you? In what ways are they different?
    a. What about in terms of race? Gender? Social Class?
    b. Have you noticed particular demographics at a convention?
11. What was your first experience with “fandoms”? (Prompt: who, why, when, how?)
    a. Are you are part of an online fandom?
    b. Is there a difference between the online community and interpersonal community?

12. When you talk to other people about [specific fandom], what do you usually talk about?
13. How would you define “fan culture”? –textbook (prompt participant to deepen their answer)
    a. Is there a difference between the terms geek, nerd, and fan?
    b. How would you describe a typical fan? How do they dress or act?
    c. In your opinion, are there "fake" or "wannabe" geeks/nerds/fans (use terminology preferred by the participant)?
    d. Have you ever had any experiences with “fake” geeks? If so, could you describe them?
    e. Have you ever had any experiences where you were accused, or thought you might be accused, of being a fake geek? If so, could you describe them?
14. A number of other [people] I’ve interviewed have said they’ve experienced sexual harassment/gatekeeping/discrimination. Is that true for you?
    a. Examples?
    b. If no, have they seen it or have had friends/acquaintances who have experienced this?
15. What does fan culture mean to you personally?
16. Have you seen any examples of how the community has become more welcoming of the non-typical fan?
17. What do you think are the typical demographics of a character
    a. Has it always been this way?

18. What are some of your favorite memories from conventions? Least favorite memories from conventions? (Prompt participants to reflect upon differences in memories, which occurs more, in what context least favorite happened?)
19. Through these interviews, I have had a lot of people mention the term "Con Friends." What does this term mean to you?
    a. Can you describe how you met these people and what developed from meeting at the convention?
    b. How does it contribute to your sense of community?
20. What made you decide to start costuming/cosplaying? What characters have you cosplayed as?
21. What made you decide to dress as the character you have chosen?
22. What are the reactions you typically see to your cosplaying?
    a. Do you notice that particular people tend to respond in similar ways?
    b. That's interesting that you cosplay as someone of a different demographic….
23. What is one thing you would change about the fan community? How?
24. Is there anything that you would like to add?
25. Do you want to choose your own pseudonym?

Appendix D

Document Images

Image 1: Rhode Island Comic Con, 2015, Speed Dating Advertisement Sign

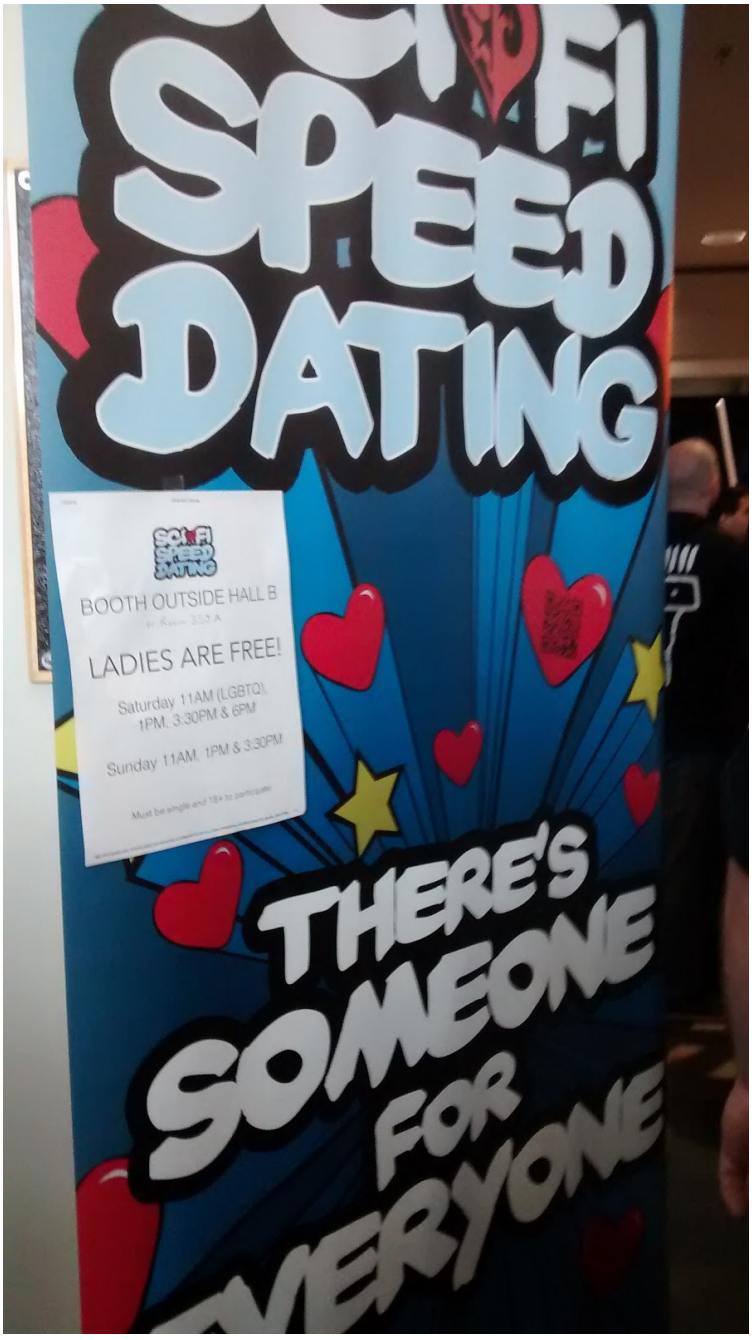

Image 2: Boston Comic Con, 2016, Bathroom labeled as unisex

Image 3: Artist alley at San Diego Comic-con, featuring photographs of women in sexualized poses or with disproportionate body parts.